



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Confirmation Bias and Antisemitism

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Antisemitism has fragmented into many subcategories in the postmodern era, which has made it ever more confusing and opaque. One concept that can shed new light on contemporary antisemitism is confirmation bias: the idea that people are often receptive to information, even if dubious, that confirms their existing opinions.

Sometimes a new expression sheds fresh light on ancient ideas. One example is the phrase “confirmation bias”, which was coined only 60 years ago. It means that people are more receptive to information, even questionable information, that confirms their existing opinions.

By looking at the problem of antisemitism through the lens of confirmation bias, we can better understand how it has persisted so stubbornly over the centuries.

Christian theologians long stereotyped Jews as evil, claiming they were collectively responsible across the generations for the death of Jesus. Clergymen regularly confirmed the opinions of those members of their flocks who held this prejudice. Anti-Defamation League (ADL) studies show that many modern-day Westerners continue to believe the Jews are responsible for Jesus’ death (22% in Europe, 26% in the US, and 22% in Argentina). This is despite the fact that the primary historical promoter of this notion, the Catholic Church, took the opinion back in its document *Nostra Aetate*, which is now over 50 years old.

The persistence of this and other antisemitic tropes can be explained in part by confirmation bias, which is more prominent today than ever before thanks to the instant and widespread dissemination of personal opinions over social media.

Hate speech confirms the bias of those who already believe it. This can be seen in the proliferation of a host of more contemporary anti-Jewish hate motifs that are constantly repeated by modern-day antisemites. One of these newer motifs

is that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the country of which they are citizens. This kind of accusation is almost never hurled at other immigrant communities residing in democratic European societies. Consider, for example, Turkish immigrants living in Western countries, many of whom exercise their right to dual citizenship and use it to vote in favor of Erdoğan's anti-democratic measures. They draw little if any condemnation for this. Jewish citizens of Western countries, on the other hand, most of whom do not claim Israeli citizenship, are suspected of dual loyalty simply because they are Jews.

Many other antisemitic prejudices are kept alive by confirmation bias, particularly in the Arab world. As Rafael Israeli has illustrated, the centuries-old blood libel and the Jew-as-poisoner motif litter contemporary Arab texts. These outrageous prejudices also sometimes appear in new forms in the Western world. For example, the largest Swedish paper, the socialist *Aftonbladet*, published an article by Donald Boström in 2009 stating that Israel kills Palestinians to harvest their organs. Rutgers associate professor Jasbir Puar, during a speech at Vassar College in 2016, accused Israel of “extracting organs from Palestinians for medical research.”

Were there not a long history of antisemitic blood libels behind such accusations, they would have little importance. But because they fit within an established history of such antisemitic motifs, confirmation bias encourages them to be more readily accepted.

Nico Voigtländer and Hans-Joachim Voth state in a lengthy article about Nazi Germany, “Where schooling could tap into preexisting prejudices, indoctrination was particularly strong. This suggests that confirmation bias may play an important role in intensifying attitudes toward minorities.”

The worst example of the impact of confirmation bias on Jew-hatred is the more than 1,500-year-old core antisemitic trope that Jews are the embodiment of absolute evil. For Christians, the killing of Jesus was the most evil act imaginable, and the church fed their belief that the Jews were responsible for it. For the Nazis, Jews were “subhuman”, “vermin”, or “bacteria” and thus warranted extermination.

Today, the genocidal Nazis are themselves the symbol of absolute evil. Antisemitism has accordingly adapted to permit the labeling of Jews as Nazis. Many citizens of the EU are openly willing to accept and repeat the slander that Israel intends to exterminate the Palestinians and thus has a Nazi ideology.

Christians created the infrastructure for this hateful perception through their blaming of the Jews for the death of Jesus. The Germans intensified it during the Holocaust, helped by many Europeans for whom the Nazi position on the

Jews confirmed their Christian bias. The absurd belief that Israel wants to exterminate the Palestinians could not have become so widespread without tapping into the confirmation bias of those who already believe Jews are evil.

Other related topics can be clarified by looking at them through the lens of confirmation bias. Some philosophers and others claim, for instance, that the Holocaust was not unique but a genocide like any other. Once one grasps the power of confirmation bias, one sees how perverse this position is. No other genocide was based on a profound prejudice that had been nursed and carried on for centuries on end. The Armenian, Cambodian, and Rwandan genocides were horrifying, but they were not the culmination of a persistent hatred that has lasted more than a thousand years.

Nor is that the only element that makes the Holocaust unique. The existence of long-lasting prejudices against Jews are what made it possible for the Germans to round up, transport, and murder them so efficiently. No other genocide has ever been characterized by an industrial attempt to hunt down and slaughter every member of a group wherever they may reside in the world, with the object of exterminating them completely from the face of the earth.

French leftist philosopher Alain Badiou wrote: “If one wants to resolve the problem of the unlimited war of the Middle East, one has to arrive, I know it is something difficult—to forget the Holocaust.” By viewing this astonishing conclusion through the lens of confirmation bias, one can better see how appalling it is.

The existence of confirmation bias suggests that better education is needed as a remedy to antisemitism. It would of course be helpful, but it will not be easy. Prejudices are irrational. Those who are accustomed to having their prejudices confirmed in the public domain cannot be easily educated out of them—particularly in the era of social media, which bombards users with online antisemitic messages.

There is another major example of confirmation bias that many Westerners refuse to acknowledge. The Arab and Muslim world incessantly repeats the most vile antisemitic slanders. Allowing Muslims to immigrate into Europe without vetting them for antisemitism increases the percentage of antisemites on the Continent.

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